

The Role of Error Analysis in ELT

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Abstract

In Second Language Acquisition learners usually make errors that are part of the normal learning process. Errors Analysis is, generally, a method through which we can identify and classify these errors which, in turn, reflect a given stage in the learner's interlanguage. In this article we are going to identify the errors made by a non-native speaker and, taking into consideration the Linguistic Category, the involved Specific Component and the Surface Strategy, we are going to classify such errors. Our discussion will be concerned with the relevance of the Error Analysis method and the possible limitation it shows in dealing with the non-native linguistic output. Generally, we assume that the Error Analysis method is relevant for academic and linguistic purposes, but it does not enable us to mirror accurately the learner's linguistic competence. In sum, this is an introduction to Error Analysis in Mozambique and we hope English teachers will improve their EA skills through the intended introduction of Error Analysis in English teacher training courses.

Abbreviations:

NP – Noun Phrase; **PRO** – Pronoun; **VP** – Verb Phrase; **N** – Noun; **Det.** – Determinant; **PP** – Preposition Phrase; **Adv** – Adverb; **Adj.** – Adjective; **Prep** – Preposition; **AdjP** – Adjectival Phrase; **AP** – Adverbial Phrase; **S** – Sentence; **ELT** – English Language Teaching; **EA** – Error Analysis; **SLA** – Second Language Acquisition; **Aux** – Auxiliary; **IL** – Interlanguage.

1. Introduction

The present article takes into consideration that language learning is a process during which learners have errors that are part of the process itself and, it is aimed at helping English Language teachers to analyse and correct the learner's errors, meantime, improving their EA skills. Generally speaking, this is an introduction to EA in the Mozambican context, taking into consideration that there are no EA studies that focus on ELT in our academic context throughout the country.

According to Dulay (1982), errors are parts of the learner's speaking or writing that deviate from the norm of mature language performance. It is not what Graddol (2006) calls the world Englishes (as we have to be aware of these English varieties across the world), but the errors that are systematically made by the learner. Furthermore, Corder (1981) has noted that there is a difference between errors and mistakes. Following from this author, mistakes are the errors that when they are made, they are immediately corrected by the speaker/writer, while errors are the mistakes that are made systematically. These errors mirror the learner's linguistic competence limitations in what s/he is expected to know in a given level or in comparison with what a native speaker could say/write to express the same message. Here, it also is important to note that from these errors the native speakers are capable of reconstructing the non-native speaker's intended message.

2. Identification and Classification of Errors

Identifying learner errors implies a reconstruction of what the speaker/writer intended in his/her message. This may be done by asking the speaker or by using the context in which the words were uttered or written. Identifying and classifying errors enables the teacher to grasp the main difficulties a learner has in mastering the language and this is useful in understanding the SLA process in a given class, in a given learning context or within a certain group of language learners. This may, in turn, be useful for the curriculum designers in language planning, especially in designing the language corpus. Therefore, looking at our Mozambican context, we may conclude that teacher development programmes in the existing Institute of Languages, Pedagogic University, Eduardo Mondlane University, Professorship Primary Institutes – *IMAPs* and many other institutions which deal with teacher training courses could incorporate language awareness components focusing on EA from the lexico-grammatical point of view, meantime, providing them with guided opportunities for examining learner output from this perspective, as Salem (2007) noted in her EA analysis.

Moreover, in this article we will follow the general five (5) steps in EA: data collection, errors identification, errors classification, errors frequency and identification of the difficulties shown by these errors. The data below were taken from a conversation between a native speaker and a non-native speaker. There are different ways through which we may analyse/classify learner errors. For instance, according to Garret (1980), we may have: anticipation/perseveration errors; shifts; exchanges; substitutions and blends. In the present EA, we will only show the analysed sentences (now that there is no enough space for showing the whole conversation), where we will identify the errors and classify them according to the EA taxonomy. That is, in EA it is important to take into consideration the Linguistic Category (the general syntactic unit affected by the error), the Specific Component (word class or grammatical category affected) and the Surface Strategy (the nature of the error) as follows:

NP – PRO- Subject – Omission

- (190) Yes, yes he he liked^{likes} but er ^{he is} very busy ~~also~~ because er ^{in the} morning
 (214) ^{He} is learning er English,
 (336) No ~~no no~~. ^{They are} from that friend.
 (358) ^{It} is terrible, oh yes.

NP – N – Plural – Omission

- (278) no problem^s.
 (334) two cat^s and two kitten^s.
 (340) and er I keep the the cat^s, two cat^s and er ^a dog
 (350) is er there ~~is~~ ^{were} two kitten^s.
 (406) the dog^s ~~is~~ ^{are} no^t accept^{ed} for ~~the~~ beach^{es}, and no^t accept^{ed} for ~~the~~

NP – PRO – she – addition

- (282) ~~She~~, the teacher stay^{ed} two weeks

NP – Det – the – Omission

- (190) ^{he is} very busy also because er ^{in the} morning
 (342) and er ^{on the} second day

NP – Det – a - Addition

- (192) he has a private lesson^s ~~in~~^{at} Hamilton.
 (218) Er now just a one, Simon.

NP – Det – a – Wrong choice

- (264) he has er ~~the~~^a friend,
 (404) ^{when} You come, ~~you~~^{to} visit Australia for ~~the~~^a weekend,

NP – Det – a- an – Omission

- (264) ^{an} Australiaⁿ friend,
 (340) ...two cat^s and er ^adog

NP – DET – the – Addition

- (264) Soccer ~~but~~^{and} er he has er ~~the~~^a friend, ^{an} Australiaⁿ friend,
 (278) he start^{ed} ~~the~~ school with er a new teacher
 (338) ... my friend ~~is go~~^{went} back ~~in~~^{to} France for ~~the~~ holidays
 (406) ~~the~~ dog^s ~~is~~^{are} no^t accept^{ed} for ~~the~~ beach^{es}, ^{and} no^t accept^{ed} for ~~the~~
 (412) ~~the the~~ last weekend erm we ~~go~~^{went to the} lake

NP – N – Lexical head – Wrong form

- (264) ... ^{an} Australiaⁿ friend,

NP – Pro – Wrong choice

- (420) ~~He's~~^{It's} not very happy.
 (266) he play^s with er ~~us~~^{him}

NP – Pro- there – Omission

- (404) ~~No~~, ^{there} is a a problem with er the dog.

NP – N- Lexical head – Wrong choice

- (412) ...what is the name^{word?}

VP – Adv. – not – Wrong choice

- (406) the dog^s ~~is~~^{are} no^t accept^{ed} for ~~the~~ beach^{es}, ^{and} no^t accept^{ed} for ~~the~~

VP – Verb – Wrong choice

- (216) just a er a teacher for ~~learning~~^{teaching} English ~~with~~ er ^{to} Simon.
 (274) ~~and~~ James. Er ^{and} Simon ~~speak~~^{talk} ~~with er~~^{about} him.

VP – Tense – Present – Omission

- (196) and ^{at} twelve o'clock he take^s a bus ~~for the~~^{to} Wallsend South.
 (224) He speak^s er and er he understand^s er ~~more~~^{better}.
 (206) Yes, ~~for~~^{to} Hamilton, and ^{when} he come^s back
 (266) he play^s with er ~~us~~^{him}
 (336) No no no, ^{they are} from that friend.

VP – Tense – Past – Wrong form

- (278) he start^{ed} ~~the~~ school with er a new teacher
 (286) and er I ~~have~~^{had} erm nowhere ^{to go}.
 (338) my friend ~~is go~~^{went} back ~~in~~^{to} France ~~for the~~^{to} holidays,

- (406) the dog^s ~~is~~^{are} not accept^{ed} for ~~the~~ beaches, ^{and} not accept^{ed} for ~~the~~
 (412) ...last weekend erm we ~~go~~^{went to the} lake

VP – Verb – present - Wrong form

- (190) Yes, yes he he ~~liked~~^{likes}...

VP – Verb – Aux. – Omission

- (214) ~~He is~~ learning er English,

VP – Verb - infinitive– Omission

- (286) and er I ~~have~~^{had} erm nowhere ^{to go}.

VP – Aspect – progressive – Omission

- (222) Yes, he ~~is~~ progress^{ing} er quickly, yes.

PP – Prep – wrong choice

- (194) ~~on~~^{at} half past nine and er what is ... ^{at} twelve o'clock ~~in~~^{at} Hamilton,
 (196) and ^{at} twelve o'clock he takes a bus ~~for the~~^{to} Wallsend South
 (206) yes, ~~for~~^{to} Hamilton, and ^{when} he come^s back
 (216) just a er a teacher for ~~learning~~^{teaching} English ~~with~~^{er to} Simon.
 (274) ~~and~~ James. Er ^{and} Simon ~~speak~~^{talk} ~~with-er~~^{about} him.

PP – Prep – Omission

- (194) and ^{at} twelve o'clock ~~in~~^{at} Hamilton...
 (196) ...^{at} twelve o'clock he take^s a bus ~~for the~~^{to} Walsend
 (274) ~~and~~ James. Er ^{and} Simon ~~speak~~^{talk} ~~with-er~~^{about} him.
 (404) ^{when} You come, ~~you~~^{to} visit Australia for ~~the~~^a weekend,

AdjP – Adj – better- Wong choice

- (224) He speak^s er and er he understand^s er ~~more~~^{better}.

AP – Adv – also- Addition

- (190) Yes, yes he he ~~liked~~^{likes} but er ~~he is~~^{he is} very busy ~~also~~ because er ^{in the} morning

S – Conjunction –and - wrong choice

- (264) Soccer ~~but~~^{and} he has er ~~the~~^a friend, ^{an} Australiaⁿ friend,

S – Conjunction – and - Omission

- (406) the dog^s ~~is~~^{are} not accept^{ed} for ~~the~~ beaches, ^{and} not accept^{ed} for ~~the~~
 (274) ~~and~~ James. Er ^{and} Simon ~~speak~~^{talk} ~~with-er~~^{about} him.

Other – S – Wrong order

- (268) at soccer and er and er he like^s the new teacher very well
 (290) the new teacher, ~~and~~ ~~but~~ er no ~~he doesn't~~^{he doesn't} ~~cry~~^{er}
 (288) teacher and James doesn't like the new teacher very well

Other- Errors at the level of collocation

- (400) Oh yes (laugh) but the children er ~~don't er, doesn't okay, don't okay for~~^{like them}
 (412) ~~for a dog no.~~^{Not for a dog.}
 (404) ~~No, but me~~ yes. Yes, but for me it's not

3. Discussion

The non-native speaker has a certain set of the English grammatical rules, but he has not yet mastered all the basic aspects which would enable him to produce a more comprehensible linguistic output. In the conversation, the speaker shows lack of grammatical rules in relation to:

Noun Phrases: the learner has limitations in using noun phrases, which involve addition, omission and wrong choice of a linguistic component. In the construction of sentences which require an agreement in terms of number, the *he* shows lack of a grammatical rule, by using singular where *he* should use plural (334). Double marking, as shown in (282), is an error which results in an additional use of “she” and “the teacher”, where “she” is a redundant pronoun.

Verb Phrases: the limitations in verb phrases involves mostly the tense (misuse of present and past tense), now that it is almost omitted or in a wrong form, in a wrong choice, including the omission of the progressive aspect.

Preposition Phrases: in the use of prepositions, the learner omits or chooses them wrongly.

Adjectival Phrases: although it is not frequent, the learner omits adjectives where they are necessary to complete the meaning of a sentence (224).

Sentences and *Others*: the learner has limitations in terms of sentence structure, where subordination and coordination are part of his negative learning outcome. That is the reason why he chooses wrong conjunctions (264), and sometimes he omits them. Another kind of errors in the sentence level has to do with its order and, these wrong orders sometimes are at the level of collocation. We can see that in (400), the learner cannot retrieve suitable words from his long-term memory.

The consistent (developmental) errors identified show that the learner has not yet internalized some grammatical rules of the English language system, given that he has limitations in his linguistic competence. For example, in (404) we can see that the speaker has not yet mastered (not part of the learner’s intake) the tag questions, now that he uses “no”, where he should use “yes”.

Furthermore, In Clark & Clark (1977) we find that in language production process we have the discourse plan, the sentence plan, the constituent plan, the articulator program and the articulation, which is the language output. This output may be influenced by previous planning steps and by the context in which the words are uttered. Here we may find slips of tongue which may imply some mistakes that can be misunderstood as errors in EA. The slips of tongue are found, mainly, at the beginning of a sentence, as we can see in the repetition of pronouns (a, the) and conjunctions (and). The speaker is aware of these slips of the tongue and he uses them as strategies of filling the gap between one lexical item and another (long gap, searching for a content word; short gap, a functional word), planning his discourse or even searching for lexical items in his semantic and long-term memories (412, the repetition of “the lake”). This repetition or overuse of some lexical items shows that although the speaker is aware of the topic of the whole conversation, the sentence structures and lexical items produced show that he has limitations in his linguistic performance. In cases like (350), these limitations are the source of mistakes and, in this case, “is” can be considered as a false/wrong start. This is from the speaker side, but we also have the comprehension process in the listener side. Comprehension has two steps: construction of the speaker’s communicative intention and utilization of what has been constructed. Lack of background knowledge about the

issue and external/situational factors may influence the construction process and this comprehension constraint may imply a non-consistent EA.

Moreover, (from 286 to 290), we can see what in L1 is considered child talk - motherese studies - also happens in this situation, as sometimes the native speaker gives hints to the learner, enabling him to recover or access the words he is searching in his cognitive repertoire. This shows that some of the strategies used in L1 learning process, can be partially used in the process of L2 learning.

Furthermore, in EA we need to take into account the linguistic, social and cultural aspects involved, Corder (1981) and, this will lead learners to the intercultural competence that is currently required, Lo Bianco et al (1999). (Faerch et al (1984) underlines that there must be a norm which is followed so as to identify the errors and, this norm should be the one used by native speakers. This approach has some limitations because of two reasons: native speakers may have some errors and, nowadays, we have different Englishes. That is, it is said to be compulsory to teach the American or the British English in our Mozambican schools but, in the reality of our multicultural classrooms, we have learners using or both the norms or one of them but with new elements from their native languages. This is the example of Chinglish, Chinese English and many more English variations. So, in EA it is recommended that both the learner and the native speaker, including an expert in the language (an English teacher, for instance) are involved in EA process, in order to avoid partial and limited conclusions.

Finally, Faerch et al (1984) have noted that it is not easy to find a 100% EA consistency. This shows that there are many other factors involved in this process. This leads us to language production and comprehension and, this shows that, instead of cultural, linguistic and social factors, there may be personal and situational factors to be considered in EA.

4. Conclusion

This article has shown that EA is relevant for an English teacher because it helps him/her to see, progressively, to which extent the learner has mastered the content taught. Errors may also show how language is acquired as we have noted before and, more importantly, which learning strategies the learner uses in his/her learning process. This, in turn, helps the curriculum designers to see what kind of exercises to include in a given level of competence, what kind of exercises to give to a specific learner and which items are there to consider for language proficiency testing and evaluation. That is, EA helps in designing materials which fit to the learner's current cognitive stage, so as to provide the learner with the required and developmental input. However, looking at the possible accuracy of the EA, it seems that there are some limitations, as there is the possibility of different classifications. The classification *per se* should include internal and external factors which direct or indirectly can influence negatively to the learner's linguistic performance. Looking at the linguistic output from the internal perspective, the EA method only can provide tentative reasons to explain why a non-native speaker makes a given error in a given stage of his interlanguage. In spite of that, the EA is useful for our understanding of the psycholinguistic processes involved in L2 production and, a study of different developmental stages of the IL can provide insights into the whole picture of cognitive processes involved in different stages of the L2 learning process. Finally, teacher training programmes should involve English Structure and Second Language Acquisition courses so as to enable English teachers to use EA for improving their competence, for the benefit of the English teaching and learning process as a whole.

5. Bibliography

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